

Message Text

SECRET

PAGE 01 DAMASC 00453 01 OF 02 210825Z POSS DUPE
ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 IO-13 CIAE-00 PM-05 H-01
INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02
SS-15 USIA-06 SSM-03 AID-05 TRSE-00 OMB-01 MCT-01
/092 W

-----098680 220809Z /11

R 201405Z JAN 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6559
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY JUWAIT
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
SECDEF WASHDC
DIA WASHDC
USUN 771

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 0453

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1
TAGS, PINT, SY
SUBJ: ASSAD LOOKS TO HIS DOMESTIC POSITION AS PRESIDENTIAL REFERENDUM
APPROACHES

1. SUMMARY: WITH THE PRESIDENTIAL REFERENDUM ONLY THREE
WEEKS AWAY, PRES ASSAD IS MOVING SWIFTLY TO ENSURE STRONG
SUPPORT FOR HIMSELF THROUGH A SERIES OF PAY HIKES, PROMOTIONS,
AND ADMINISTRATIVE MEASURES AFFECTING LARGE NUMBERS OF SYRIANS.
SUCH MEASURES WERE WELL-TIMED TO OVERCOME MUCH OF THE DAMAGE
ASSAD'S IMAGE SUFFERED IN 1977 AS A RESULT OF SIGNIFICANT

SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 02 DAMASC 00453 01 OF 02 210825Z POSS DUPE

ECONOMIC AND OTHER DOMESTIC PROBLEMS. THESE PALLIATIVES ALONG
ARE NOT SUFFICIENT FOR ASSAD TO REGAIN HIS FORMER INDISPUTABLE
POPULARITY, BUT HE ALSO IN RECENT WEEKS HAS APPEARED TO
REGAIN HIS DEFT POLITICAL TOUCH WITH THE HELP OF SOME FOR-
TUITOUS EVENTS. THERE IS STRONG EVIDENCE TO INDICATE THAT
THE FEUDING AMONG HIS PRINCIPLE SUBORDINATES HAS, FOR AT LEAST
NOW, SUBSIDED AND THAT HE STILL RETAINS STRONG SUPPORT WITHIN

THE OFFICER CORPS, PARTICULARLY AMONG HIS ALAWITE CO-RELIGIONISTS. THE PERCEIVED FALTERING OF SADAT'S DRAMATIC PEACE INITIATIVES WHICH FOUND CONSIDERABLE POPULAR FAVOR HERE WILL HELP ASSAD RECOUP ANY SUPPORT HE LOST AS A RESULT OF THE SYRIAN MEDIA'S STRIDENT ATTACKS ON SADAT. FINALLY, THE WINTER RAINS--SO VITALLY IMPORTANT TO THE RURAL HALF OF THE POPULATION--HAVE BEEN THUS FAR EXCELLENT AND HAVE RAISED HOPES AMONG FARMERS FOR A GOOD HARVEST. ALL OF THESE DEVELOPMENTS WILL AID ASSAD IN AVOIDING A REPEAT OF THE EMBARRASSMENT THAT THE BAATH PARTY SUFFERED IN THE LAST SUMMER'S NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS AS A RESULT OF UNPRECEDENTED VOTER APATHY. END SUMMARY

2. IN PREPARATION FOR NEXT MONTH'S PRESIDENTIAL REFERENDUM, PRESIDENT AL-ASSAD HAS UNABASHEDLY ACTED TO RESTORE SOME OF THE LUSTRE TO HIS IMAGE WHICH WAS TARNISHED IN 1977 BY SYRIA'S ECONOMIC SLOWDOWN, THE WAY HIS ANTI-CORRUPTION CAMPAIGN WAS HANDLED, STRAINS AMONG SOME OF HIS TOP LIEUTENANTS, AND SECTARIAN TENSIONS. IN RESPONSE TO OUR INQUIRY THE FOREIGN MINISTRY INFORMED US THE REFERENDUM WILL BE HELD FEB 8-11. THIS WOULD BE IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE SYRIAN CONSTITUTION WHICH REQUIRES THE ELECTION TO OCCUR BETWEEN 30 TO 60 DAYS PRIOR TO THE EXPIRATION OF THE PRESIDENT'S TERM (MARCH 12, 1978)

3. WHILE WE HAVE BEEN TOLD BY A FEW KNOWLEDGEABLE SYRIANS THAT THE ANTI-CORRUPTION CAMPAIGN ANNOUNCED EARLY LAST AUGUST
SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 03 DAMASC 00453 01 OF 02 210825Z POSS DUPE

HAD THE LIMITED OBJECTIVE OF CORRECTING IMBALANCE IN ASSAD'S INNER CIRCLE, MOST SYRIANS FELT IT WAS A MAJOR INITIATIVE DESIGNED TO RESTORE ASSAD'S POPULARITY PRIOR TO PRESIDENTIAL REFERENDUM. IF THIS WAS ITS AIM, IT FALTERED BADLY WHEN ASSAD PROVED UNWILLING TO MOVE DECISIVELY AGAINST CERTAIN POWERFUL AND CORRUPT MEN WITHIN HIS RULING ELITE FOR FEAR OF UNDERMINING HIS RULE, ALTHOUGH SOME LOWER-LEVEL INVESTIGATIONS REPORTEDLY CONTINUE. THERE IS ALSO SOME INDICATION THAT ASSAD BEGAN TO RECOGNIZE THAT THE ARRESTS OF PROMINENT BUSINESSMEN WERE LEADING TO A SERIOUS LOSS OF CONFIDENCE WITHIN THE PRIVATE SECTOR RESULTING IN ECONOMIC PARALYSIS.

4. THUS, ASSAD HAS FALLEN BACK TO MORE TRADITIONAL AND ASFER MEASURES TO BOLSTER HIS POPULAR SUPPORT. ON JAN 8 HE ANNOUNCED A FLAT 25 PERCENT INCREASE FOR SYRIA'S 58,000 TEACHERS FOLLOWED ON JAN 16 BY HIS SIGNING A LAW GRANTING GRADUATED WAGE INCREASES TO THE PUBLIC SECTOR WORKERS RANGING FROM 10 TO 20 PERCENT WITH THE LOWER GRADES RECEIVING THE LARGER INCREMENTS AND SMALLER INCREASES GIVEN TO PENSIONERS. SIMULTANEOUSLY, HIS DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER FOR ECONOMIC AFFAIRS ISSUED A BLUNT WARNING TO MERCHANTS NOT TO RAISE PRICES IN THE WAKE OF THE WAGE HIKES. THE WAGE INCREASES, ACCORDING TO PRESS

REPROTS, WILL TO TO OVER 500
THOUSAND SYRIANS. (OUR OWN FIGURES FOR PUBLIC SECTOR
EMPLOYEES AND PENSIONERS ARE 400 THOUSAND.) PREVIOUSLY,
ON JAN 3, NUMEROUS PROMOTIONS AND IN-GRADE STEP INCREASES
WERE GIVEN THE OFFICER CORPS.

5. ASSAD ALSO INSTRUCTED THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION
TO INCREASE SUBSIDIES TO SYRIAN STUDENTS ON SCHOLARSHIP TAKING
INTO ACCOUNT THE COST OF LIVING IN THE COUNTRIES IN WHICH THEY
ARE RESIDENT. STUDENTS ON "SCIENTIFIC SCHOLARSHIPS" INSIDE
AND OUTSIDE SYRIA ARE TO RECEIVE INCREASES AVERAGING 15-20
PERCENT AS WELL AS ENROLLMENT IN HEALTH INSURANCE PLANS IN THE
COUNTRIES IN WHICH THEY ARE RESIDING. ANOTHER DECREE ALLOWING
PAYMENT OF MONEY IN LIEU OF MILITARY SERVICE FOR DRAFT AGE MEN
SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 04 DAMASC 00453 01 OF 02 210825Z POSS DUPE

RESIDING CONTINUOUSLY FOR FIVE YEARS OUTSIDE OF SYRIA WILL WIN
FAVOR WITH MANY MIDDLE-CLASS VOTERS WHOSE EXPATRIATE SONS HAVE
BEEN UNABLE TO VISIT THEM FOR FEAR OF MILITARY CONSCRIPTION.

6. GIVEN SYRIA'S STILL STALLED ECONOMY AND OTHER PROBLEMS
IT HAS BEEN EXPERIENCING, SUCH PALLIATIVES ALONE ARE NOT
ENOUGH FOR ASSAD TO RESTORE HIS FORMER INDISPUTABLE POPULARITY,
BUT IN RECENT WEEKS HE SEEMS TO HAVE REGAINED HIS DEFT
TOUCH AND HAS BEEN AIDED BY SOME POLITICAL WINDFALLS. HE HAS
PUT THE LID, FOR NOW, ON THE WORST OF THE FEUDING AMONG HIS
TOP MILITARY/SECURITY APPARATUS, ALTHOUGH DATT RECENTLY RECEIVED
ONE REPORT OF ALLEGED TENSION BETWEEN AIR FORCE GENERAL NAJI
JAMIL AND MINDEF MUSTAPHA ALASS. EVEN IF TRUE, IT IS STILL
A SIGNIFICANT SIGN OF REDUCED TENSION THAT RIF'AT AL-ASSAD'S
TROOPS HAVE DISMANTLED MOST OF THEIR ALERT POSITIONS IN AND
AROUND DAMASCUS AND HAVE RETURNED TO THEIR CONTONMENTS. A
NOTICEABLE DECREASE IN SECURITY MEASURES HAS ALSO OCCURRED
AROUND SOME OF RIF'AT'S HAUNTS INCLUDING THE OFFICES OF AL-
FURSAAN MAGAZINE, AND THE RUMOR WHICH ABOUNDED EARLIER ABOUT
HIGH-LEVEL INFIGHTING HAVE SUBSIDED.

SECRET

NNN

SECRET

PAGE 01 DAMASC 00453 02 OF 02 220803Z
ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-07
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15
USIA-06 SSM-03 AID-05 TRSE-00 OMB-01 MCT-01 /079 W
-----104187 220808Z /11

R 201405Z JAN 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6560
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY JUWAIT
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
SECDEF WASHDC
DIA WASHDC
USUN 772

S E C R E T SECTION 2 OF 2 DAMASCUS 0453

7. PERHAPS, AS A RESULT OF RECENT EFFORTS TO RECONCILE SYRIA AND IRAQ THERE HAS BEEN A NOTICEABLE ABSENCE OF SIGNIFICANT ANTI-REGIME TERRORIST INCIDENTS SINCE THE ASSASSINATION OF MRS. AL-ASSAD'S NEPHEW IN ALEPPO SEVERAL MONTH AGO. THIS LENDS SOME CREDIBILITY TO SYRIAN CHARGES THAT SUCH ACTS ARE IRAQI-INSPIRED) MOST IMPORTANTLY, ASSAD'S POPULARITY WITH HIS OFFICERS HAS INCREASED AS THE RESULT OF THE PREVIOUSLY MENTIONED PAY INCREASES AND WIDESPREAD PROMOTIONS ANNOUNCED THIS MONTH. THE ALL-IMPORTANT CADRE OF ALAWITE OFFICERS WITHIN THE ARMY AND AIR FORCE ON WHOM ASSAD UNTIMATELY DEPENDS REPORTEDLY ARE MORE COMMITTED IN THEIR TRADITIONALLY STRONG SUPPORT FOR HIM AND LESS RIVED BY FRACTIONALISM THAN WAS THE CASE
SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 02 DAMASC 00453 02 OF 02 220803Z

THIS FALL. A REGULAR EMBASSY SOURCE WHO HAS TALKED WITH A NUMBER OF ALAWITE OFFICERS IN THE PAST SEVERAL WEEKS SAID HE WAS STRUCK BY THE ENTHUSIASM WITH SHICH THESE OFFICERS SPOKE OF ASSAD. SOURCE'S IMPRESSION WAS THAT THESE WERE MEN WILLING TO FIGHT AND DIE FOR THE REGIME. IT IS INTERESTING THAT SAME SOURCE SOME MONTHS EARLIER HAD REPORTED THAT MANY ALAWITE OFFICERS WERE TROUBLED BY THE EXCESSES OF ASSAD'S INNER CIRCLE AND FEARFUL FOR THEIR FUTURE. HOWEVER, HIS SUPPORT AMONG HIS OFFICERS IS NOT RESTRICTED TO ALAWITES SINCE THE PROMOTION LIST FOR NOW SEEMS TO HAVE SOMEWHAT ASSUAGED SECTARIAN TENSIONS.

8. INITIALLY, WE REPORTED THE CRITICAL REACTION OF MANY SYRIANS TOWARDS ASSAD FOR PERMITTING SUCH EMOTIONAL AND STRIDENT ATTACKS

OF SADAT'S PEACE POLICIES RATHER THAN AWAITING THEIR RESULTS. ASSAD RECOUPED WHEN SADAT'S PEACE INITIATIVES RAN INTO TROUBLE AT ISMAILIA. NOW SADAT'S SUSPENSION OF EGYPT'S PARTICIPATION IN THE POLITICAL TALKS IN JERUSALEM CAN BE EXPECTED TO FURTHER STRENGTHEN ASSAD'S HAND DOMESTICALLY, SINCE SADAT'S PROBLEMS WILL, IN THE EYES OF MANY SYRIANS, CONFIRM THE CORRECTNESS OF SYRIA'S POLICY, BARRING A NEW DRAMATIC BREAK-

THROUGH IN THE TALKS. FINALLY, AT THIS TIME OF YEAR THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MOOD OF HALF OF SYRIA'S POPULATION WHICH IS RURAL IS AFFECTED BY THE AMOUNT OF RAINFALL WHICH IS CRITICAL FOR THE SIZE AND QUALITY OF THE IMPORTANT WINTER GRAIN CROP. THE RAINS HAVE BEEN FREQUENT AND ABUNDANT FOR SEVERAL MONTHS NOW. RAISING HOPES AMONG FARMERS THAT 1978 WILL WITNESS A GOOD HARVEST. THIS COULD ALSO LIMIT THE AMOUNT OF FOOD PRICE INCREASES EXPECTED AS A RESULT OF PAY RAISES.

9. IN SHORT, ASSAD APPEARS TO US MORE SELF-CONFIDENT THAN HE HAS BEEN IN MONTHS. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS SHOULD HELP HIM AVOID THE EMBARRASSMENT THE BAATH PARTY SUFFERED IN LAST
SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 03 DAMASC 00453 02 OF 02 220803Z

SUMMER'S NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS WHEN SO LITTLE OF THE ELECTORATE BOTHERED TO VOTE. UNDOUBTEDLY, A WELL-ORGANIZED EFFORT WILL BE MOUNTED TO ENSURE THAT VOTERS GO TO THE POLLS AND A PREDICTABLY OVERWHELMING MAJORITY WILL BE CLAIMED TO HAVE CAST THEIR VOTES FOR THE PRESIDENT. WHILE ASSAD IS NOT AT THE EXTRAORDINARY LEVEL OF POPULARITY HE ENJOYED PRIOR TO SENDING HIS ARMY INTO LEBANON, IT WOULD APPEAR THAT HE STILL HAS SUBSTANTIAL SUPPORT AMONG THE ELITES WHICH COUNT MOST AND PROBABLY HAS MANAGED AT LEAST FOR NOW TO QUIET SOME OF THE URBAN DISCONTENT THAT WAS IN EVIDENCE THIS FALL. EVEN THOSE WHO CRITICIZE HIM HARSHLY HAVE SECOND THOUGHTS ABOUT HIS PASSING FROM THE SCENE WHEN THEY RECALL THE DAYS WHEN RIGIDLY DOCTRINAIRE BAATHIS WERE RULING SYRIA. THE SYRIANS ARE NOT AN EASY PEOPLE TO GOVERN, AND ASSAD WITH EACH PASSING DAY CONTINUES TO BREAK THE LONGEVITY RECORD FOR A SERVING SYRIAN PRESIDENT.
MURPHY

SECRET

NNN

Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: REFERENDUMS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 20 jan 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978DAMASC00453
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: X1
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780033-0359
Format: TEL
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780141/aaaabirp.tel
Line Count: 268
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: dd25c7e1-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 5
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 01 jun 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3742827
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: ASSAD LOOKS TO HIS DOMESTIC POSITION AS PRESIDENTIAL REFERENDUM APPROACHES
TAGS: PINT, SY, (ASAD, HAFIZ)
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odb://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/dd25c7e1-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014